

Beyond Boston Harbor – The Bay State’s “Four Ports”

By Anne Donovan, CZM

Although Boston has been the predominant port in Massachusetts since the early 17th Century, a number of other locations along the Bay State’s 1,500-mile coastline have been historically important shipping hubs. Today, four ports beyond Boston continue to play a significant role in the shipping industry, generating more than 10,000 jobs and \$2 billion directly to the Commonwealth’s economy. These four ports are: Gloucester, Salem, New Bedford/Fairhaven, and Fall River.

The Fisherman’s Memorial commemorates the thousands of Gloucester fishermen who have been lost at sea.



Gloucester

Founded in 1623, Gloucester is the oldest fishing community in the United States. Its protected (and picturesque) harbor and its close proximity to the rich fishing grounds of Georges Bank made it an ideal location to launch a thriving fishing industry. The prosperity of the fishing fleet reached its zenith in the late-1970s and early-1980s, after the United States established the 200-mile fishing limit, preventing foreign fishing competition within that zone. Overfishing led to a dramatic decline in fish caught in the mid-1980s, which turned to a precipitous drop in the early-1990s. The continued struggle of the Georges Bank groundfishery has had a significant impact on the port of Gloucester and its fishermen.

Gloucester is also famous as the birthplace of frozen packaging of fish and other food products. In 1925, Clarence Birdseye invented his frozen packaging process in Gloucester, which grew into a frozen seafood product mecca. Gorton’s of Gloucester, a long-established company known for bringing easy-to-prepare fish to American families, fully embraced Birdseye’s invention, becoming the famous frozen fish stick and fillet broker that it is today. The omnipresent Gorton’s billboard along the Gloucester waterfront—with its larger-than-life raincoat-clad fisherman at the helm of a schooner—is a reminder of the continued importance of shipping, fishing, and the frozen fish business in this port city.

Despite the struggles of the fishing industry, Gloucester remains an important Bay State port. Major port industries include commercial fishing,

frozen seaport products, and services for small vessel owners. Trade is conducted with Europe, Canada, Asia, and South and Central America, with frozen fish and frozen foods as the primary cargo. Gloucester boasts the largest cold food storage facilities on the East Coast of the United States and the port employs almost 3,000 full-time and 800 part-time employees, and generates \$720 million in sales.

Salem

Named for “shalom,” the Hebrew word for peace, Salem was established as a farming and fishing community in the 1620s. Although much of its early history is overshadowed by the famous Witch Trials of 1692, Salem has a rich and long-standing maritime tradition as well. Thanks to its success as a major fishing, shipbuilding, and maritime trade center, by 1790 Salem was the sixth largest city in the country and had the highest per capita income. This prosperity was fueled by lucrative trading routes with Asia.

After the War of 1812, the port of Salem suffered as emerging ports elsewhere on the East Coast developed facilities for new, larger ships. While the importance of the port diminished, Salem grew as a manufacturing and retail center, primarily focused on leather goods and shoes. In 1940, Salem’s shipping life was revitalized with the New England Power Company’s construction of the Salem Power Plant. Historically, to keep this coal- and oil-fired electric generating facility running, more than one million tons of coal and three million barrels of petroleum products have been shipped to Salem each year.

The port of Salem today blends a thriving tourism industry with bulk cargo delivery, primarily for the Salem Power Plant. Along with interstate shipping, South America serves as a major trade route. The port generates a total of \$550 million in rents, taxes, and sales. Major tourist attractions include the Peabody Essex Museum, with its worldwide collections underscoring the historical importance of Salem as a major maritime trade center; the Salem Maritime National Historic Site; magnificent 18th Century homes built by wealthy shipping merchants and captains; the 171-foot-long *Friendship*, a scale replica of a 1791 East Indiaman merchant tall ship; Nathaniel Hawthorne's House of Seven Gables; the Salem Willows Amusement Park; and downtown historical museums and cultural events.

New Bedford/Fairhaven

New Bedford's history is strongly linked to shipping, particularly whaling. Immortalized in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, which was

inspired by a journey Melville took on the *Acushnet* out of New Bedford, the whaling industry put New Bedford on the map as the richest city in the world. In the early and mid-1800s, New Bedford was the world's most successful whaling port, providing huge profits for ship sponsors and earning the city the reputation for unsurpassed riches. New Bedford's whaling merchants were also involved in other maritime enterprises, including shipbuilding and sail making. In fact, shipbuilding was the cornerstone of the port's whaling success, with Joseph Rotch building whaling ships with rendering facilities onboard, allowing the whalers to stay out at sea searching for the next whale, while the one they had just harvested was broken down into oil and other component parts. The city and its harbor are also recognized for their significant role in the Underground Railroad in the mid-1800s.

The discovery of petroleum in 1859 signaled the beginning of the end of the whaling industry, and by the 1920s, seeing the end in sight,

the resourceful New Bedford whalers channeled their profits into offshore fishing vessels. The fishing fleet grew for decades, and through the late-1980s to the present, it has often been ranked near or at the top of U.S. ports for the value of its seafood landings. This success is primarily due to New Bedford being the center of the lucrative sea scallop industry.

Employing 3,700 people and generating \$671 million in sales, the port of New Bedford/Fairhaven maintains its status as home to the East Coast's largest fishing fleet and one of the largest seafood processing industries. It also is an important shipping port with major markets including perishable goods (primarily seafood and fresh fruit), vessel service, frozen fish and meat, petroleum products, calcium chloride, lumber, sand, gravel, and salt. This truly global port conducts shipping worldwide. New Bedford/Fairhaven Harbor is part of the New Bedford Free Trade Zone, which provides manufacturing opportunities for duty-free importers and exporters. New Bedford is also a growing

By the early 1800s, whaling had built New Bedford into the richest city in the world.



Lobster is the most important commercial fishery in the territorial waters of the Commonwealth.

tourism center, serving as home to the world-class New Bedford Whaling Museum, the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, and the County Street historic area with its dozens of mansions built in the golden age of whaling in the early 1800s. Today, one of the Martha's Vineyard Ferries departs from Billy Woods Wharf in New Bedford's outer harbor. New major port and tourism facilities along the waterfront, including an international transportation center, renovations to the state pier, and a world-class Oceanarium, are currently in progress.

Fairhaven is home to Fort Phoenix State Reservation with its remnants of its namesake National Landmark Fort, complete with cannons and views of Buzzards Bay. Fairhaven hosts significant numbers of fishing vessels and one of the larger boat repair industries in the northeast.

Fall River

Despite its location 24 miles up Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay, where the Taunton River meets Mount Hope Bay, the port of Fall River is a thriving shipping location, second only to

Boston in cargo volume. Its assets include deep waters and unsurpassed transportation links via rail and road. The port generates more than 3,500 jobs and \$709 million in sales. Fall River's trade area includes Europe, the Caribbean, and South America, and its major markets are paper, frozen fish, chemicals, and other break bulk cargoes; vehicle and equipment export; and coal and lignite.

Unlike its sister ports elsewhere in the Commonwealth, Fall River's first major port development project occurred during the Industrial Revolution—a deep-water incubator for the textile industry. Fall River faced economic peril when the textile mills began to move south in the 1930s, but the port rallied, becoming a regional fuel center with a niche trade in bulk cargoes and specialty shipbuilding (located across the river in Somerset). Fall River also developed one of the first tourist-oriented waterfronts in the United States, built around the World War II battleship, the *U.S.S. Massachusetts*.

All of the major ports outside of Boston Harbor have undergone a comprehensive planning process to improve their economic prospects. See *Planning for the Four Ports* on page 15 for more information on development activities for Gloucester, Salem, New Bedford/Fairhaven, and Fall River.

Hail to the four ports and their rich and diverse history! Their individual rise, fall, and now renewed vigor are a testament to the lasting importance of the shipping industry to the Bay State.



photo by Arden W. Miller